

Point of view and narration in kingsolver's "the poisonwood bible"



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"The Poisonwood Bible," by Barbara Kingsolver, is a scathing critique of the destructive nature of pride and ambition, its narrative spanning over thirty years to reveal the tragic shortcomings of evangelist Nathan Price and the Western colonial attitudes he represents. In order to personalize the epic scope of the novel, Kingsolver writes in the first person, alternately inhabiting the minds of the four Price sisters and their mother, Orleanna. Although the hotheaded preacher, Nathan Price, is usually caught at the heart of the story's conflicts, the primary storytelling vehicles are his daughters, with his wife serving as a poetic footnote at key moments in the narration. Thus, the book can be read as five separate, but interdependent, stories, interwoven to form a coherent movement from beginning to end.

On the stage of the Congo's struggle for political independence, the saga of the Price family unfolds as a morality play, making the use of perspective and point of view critical to Kingsolver's rhetorical purpose. Rather than reading Nathan Price's self-righteous explanations of his own actions, the reader is given five different personalities through which to understand the failure of the Price family mission. Through the clever use of individualized "voices," the author is able to bring together a "three dimensional" portrait of an evangelist possessed by great zeal but, ultimately, lacking in knowledge. Of the five narrative "voices," Leah acts most often as her father's apologist, often explaining and reasoning through her father's actions in the first half of the book. This support comes not from a desire to squelch the native cultures, however, but from genuine faith and compassion. Thus, as her father slowly dwindles into a self-righteous mouthpiece for Western colonialism, Leah's respect for him gradually ebbs.

Her moral qualities remain, but they begin to find new expression in politics as the story progresses, signifying a slow turn from abstract religious thought to concrete moral action.

The other sisters take a more ambivalent approach to their father's actions. Rachel, in particular, reveals a self-centered personality more concerned with pleasure than ideology. Adah, on the other hand, demonstrates an abstract, but intelligent perspective, colored by her crippling birth defect. She is piercingly cynical, but her insights and observations are always keen, and she comes off as the most intellectual of the sisters. There is a note of irony in the fact that, from the outside perspective of the other narrators, Adah is viewed as intellectually deficient because of her silence. Yet, when the reader is taken "inside" Adah's mind, the contrast between what others observe about Adah and what Adah is capable of is shocking. In a sense, the crippled girl is used as a metaphor for Africa and its relationship with Nathan Price. Like Adah, Africa is viewed as deficient from an outside perspective, but if one could only see things through the eyes of the Congolese people, the picture would be starkly different.

In fact, the closest thing to an African "voice" that Kingsolver provides is Nathan's wife, Orleanna. Ruined by the guilt of having lost her youngest daughter to the harsh Congo, Orleanna's brief entries into the narrative take the form of poetic meanderings, often describing Africa as a living person haunting the Price family's past. In contrast to Orleanna's writings, Ruth May takes a double role. In the earlier parts of the book, she writes as any other five-year-old, with an adventurous but often naive perspective. After her death, however, she becomes a silent figure lurking somewhere in her <https://assignbuster.com/point-of-view-and-narration-in-kingsolvers-the-poisonwood-bible/>

mother's memory, a symbol of the family's guilt and an indictment of misguided ambitions. This guilt presses on Orleanna's conscience until the last chapter, in which the deceased Ruth May expresses her forgiveness for her mother's mistakes. Here the "voice" of Ruth May takes a turn so drastic that the reader does not know it is her speaking until the end of the chapter. No longer the five-year-old girl, Ruth May has become something of an angelic figure, and her speech has been altered to reflect a more poetic, "ascended" feeling. In a sense, then, she becomes a metaphor for the Christian idea of rebirth; an illustration of things destroyed on Earth made anew in the afterlife. Because her perspective has been broadened in the spiritual afterlife, she is able to forgive not just the shortcomings of her own family, but of the entire effort to "civilize" the Congo. As an ascended figure able to offer forgiveness, she acts as a subtle symbol for Jesus Christ.

Because this novel deals so heavily with morality, ethics, and politics, it could all too easily become a one-sided argument for a particular point of view. By allowing the reader to learn about events through the eyes of Nathan Price's family, however, Kingsolver is able to paint a fully believable portrait of this prideful evangelist's struggle. Rather than condemning or exalting the Price family mission, the author presents the impact that it has on five individual personalities, and, by extension, on the Congolese people. This creates an effect of realism and forces the reader to consider the story from different viewpoints and, in the case of Adah, even different belief structures. For the evangelical Christian, this acts as a profound reminder of the fact that the manner in which we present our message is as important as the message itself, which is the underlying theme of the novel.